

Airborne Ground Cavalry

In a Unique Unit of the 82nd Airborne Scouting Begins 800 Feet Above the Ground

by Captain Gregory K. Stephens

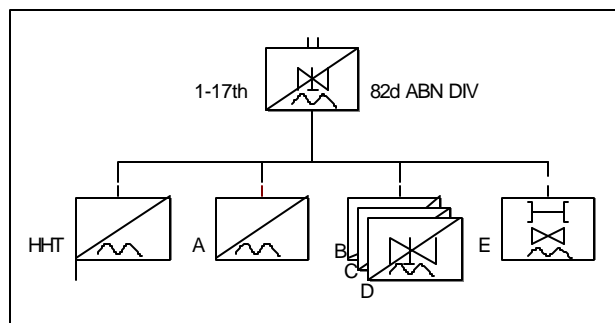
There are only four individual light cavalry troops in the United States Army. Of these four units, Alpha Troop, 1st Squadron, 17th Cavalry, 82d Airborne Division is the only airborne ground cavalry unit. During over three years in that unit as a platoon leader and the executive officer, I saw many maneuver commanders and some of the personnel at Fort Knox fail to fully understand the Troop's Modified Table of Organization and Equipment (MTOE) or capabilities. Because of this, Alpha Troop was not used to its fullest extent by other units. In this article, I will explain Alpha Troop's organization and overall mission and capabilities in order to clear up misunderstandings and fully explain this unique unit.

Alpha Troop, also known as "Shadow," is a part of the 82d Aviation Brigade. This brigade, which contains all of the 82d Airborne Division's helicopter assets, has one attack battalion, one lift battalion, and one cavalry squadron. The attack and lift battalions consist of OH-58D Kiowa Warriors and UH-60L Blackhawks respectively. The attack battalion used to have AH-64 Apaches instead of the OH-58Ds; however, the 82d Airborne Division decided to switch because the OH-58Ds can be off-loaded from tactical aircraft such as the C-130 and C-141 much more quickly, and more aircraft can be carried in a single plane. The cavalry squadron consists of three OH-58D troops, a maintenance and headquarters troop, and the ground troop. Alpha Troop is a unique asset as it is the only maneuver ground element in the entire brigade.

The MTOE for Alpha Troop consists of four platoons of five High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) and the headquarters section.

Each platoon is authorized two M1025 ("Turtleshell" HMMWV), one M1026 ("Turtleshell" w/winch), and two M966 TOW HMMWVs. Each platoon is authorized one officer and 14 enlisted men. The headquarters section is authorized one M1025 for the commander and two M998s for the 1SG and the supply sergeant. The headquarters section has one officer and five enlisted men, which includes the NBC NCO and the supply sergeant. The troop's maintenance team, which consists of one E7 motor sergeant, and an E5 and E3 light wheeled vehicle mechanic, are held under squadron control. The total troop strength is 5 officers and 61 enlisted men.

The current organization of the troop is a little different, however, for reasons which will be discussed later. Currently, Alpha Troop has three platoons of six vehicles with the headquarters section. The sixth vehicle for each of the platoons came from the fourth platoon, with the two TOW HMMWVs moving to the headquarters section. The headquarters section currently consists of two M966 TOW HMMWVs, two M1025 HMMWVs for the commander and executive officer, and the two M998 HMMWVs for the 1SG and supply ser-



geant. The extra M1025 is an additional vehicle authorized, but not required by the MTOE organization. This organization gives each platoon a personnel strength of one officer and 17 enlisted men with the headquarters section having two officers and 10 enlisted men. For a light unit, Alpha Troop has a vast amount of firepower, the most in the division since 3-73rd Armor was deactivated. Each platoon is equipped with two MK19 40-mm grenade launchers, two M2 HB machine guns, and two TOW IIB missile launchers. In addition to these weapons, each vehicle also carries an M60 machine gun as its secondary weapon. Each individual soldier carries an M16 with three of the weapons equipped with M-203 grenade launchers. Each platoon also has a tremendous ability to fight at night. Besides the two thermal sights for the TOW launchers, the other four gun HMMWVs also have thermal sights mounted on top of the hatches, which gives every vehicle in the three line platoons thermal capability. Each platoon also has PVS-7B night vision goggles, PVS-4 and TVS-5 night sights for the crew-served weapons, and PAQ-4Cs, which are infrared laser pointers used on the M16. It allows a soldier to sight in the M16 by placing a beam of light on the target, which can only be seen through NVGs, and allows pinpoint accuracy once properly zeroed.

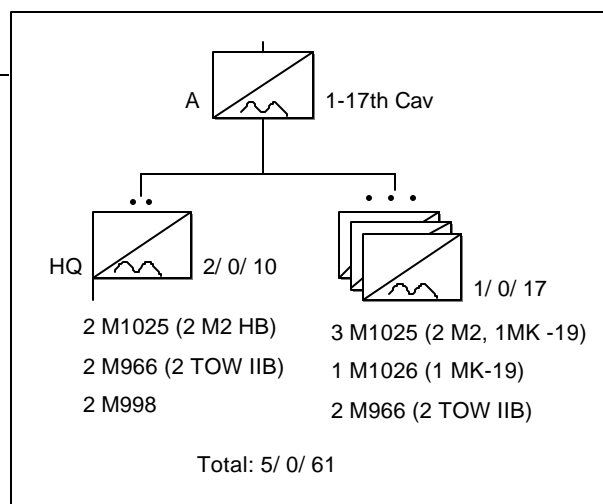
The headquarters section is nicknamed "The Fighting HQ Section," as it also carries some firepower for reinforcing another platoon when needed. The commander and executive officer both carry an M2 HB machine gun with the other two vehicles mounting the TOW IIB missile launcher. There are also three M60 machine guns in the headquarters section, and it is equipped with all of the same night vision capabilities as the three line platoons, except for the additional thermal sights.

Unlike a more normally organized cavalry squadron, this unit has no mortars. Its supporting firepower comes from the three air troops which have the OH-58D. This helicopter can be equipped with 2.75-inch rockets and Hellfire missiles, and also carries an M2 HB machine gun under the fuselage of the aircraft. Alpha Troop and the three air troops have a very close relationship; they constantly train together and work to perfect the air-ground concept. The air troops normally screen in front of Alpha Troop, staying approximately one phase line ahead. By doing this, they can relay possible enemy locations, danger areas, or better routes to follow. For fire support, the troop has attached a fire support team (FIST) which

includes one officer, two enlisted men, and an M1025 HMMWV.

The original MTOE organization was actually four platoons and one headquarters section, but this was changed to three platoons about six months after I had arrived at Fort Bragg in May of 1994. After seeing both organizations, I feel that the three platoons of six vehicles is a much better organization for two main reasons. The first is because FM 17-98 is written for either a six-vehicle Bradley platoon or ten-vehicle HMMWV platoon. By having six vehicles, the platoon can break down evenly into either two or three sections. With only five vehicles, the platoon can only break down into two sections with the platoon leader by himself as the command and control element. This not only reduces security, since the platoon leader does not have a wingman, but also effectively reduces the frontage that a single platoon can cover. The second reason for the three platoon organization is because it enhances the command and control element. The commander now has a dedicated executive officer who can not only help keep track of logistics and maintenance, but also help the commander fight the battle. In the original MTOE, the fourth platoon leader is the senior platoon leader and an acting executive officer. Although this concept may work in a garrison environment, it is very difficult for even a seasoned lieutenant not only to command his platoon, but also to keep track of the entire troop logistically and operationally.

There are only three other separate light cavalry troops in the United States Army, not including those troops which are part of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fort Polk, Louisiana. These troops are located at Fort Wainwright, Alaska; Fort Drum, New York; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Some of these light cavalry troops organize their eight TOW IIB systems into two anti-armor platoons, which support the two scout platoons. This is very similar to the M3 Bradley/M1A1 Abrams tank mix in an armored division cavalry troop. Again, the problem with this organization is that the overall frontage that the troop can cover is reduced because there are only two platoons abreast in a zone. Although the TOW IIB system's capability is greatly reduced in a wooded environment, the vehicle can be configured to carry the



M60 machine gun either with or without the TOW IIB system. This allows the crew to operate in terrain that reduces the weapons observation and fields of fire. Also, by integrating the TOW IIB systems with each of the platoons, it allows them to have anti-armor capability readily available should they need to use it.

The headquarters section is best operated when the executive officer uses the additional M1025 HMMWV. Depending on the current strength of the troop, the executive officer will use either the M1025, or if there is not enough personnel, one of the M966 TOW HMMWVs will be used. Having the additional vehicle allows both the commander and executive officer to operate independently with a wingman. By retaining control of the additional two TOW IIB systems, the commander may flex them throughout the battlefield. The 1SG will be moving around from the combat and field trains with the supply sergeant operating primarily at the BSA.

Alpha Troop is capable of many different missions and can arrive on the battlefield by a number of ways. The one thing that sets the troop apart from all other troops is its capability of making an airborne assault. Every single soldier and piece of equipment within the troop can be placed on the battlefield at night by parachute. During an alert, the support units will aid in rigging each HMMWV on platforms with three G-11 parachutes attached. These platforms are then placed on either C-130, C-141, or C-17 aircraft, and dropped approximately a minute before the soldiers jump to minimize injury from the heavy equipment falling onto the soldiers. During peacetime, the platforms are dropped at an altitude of approximately 1,100 feet above ground level (AGL), while the paratroopers are dropped at around 800 feet AGL. During a combat jump; however, the altitudes are reduced, with the soldiers jumping at only 500 feet AGL. Once on the ground,

the soldiers link up with the equipment and can be ready to conduct operations within a very short time. This allows the Army to place troops into another country very quickly, as the world is one big drop zone. The 82d's mission is to have aircraft taking off within 18 hours upon notification of an alert.

The troop's other capability is conducting air-mobile operations. Whether mounted or dismounted, the troop can be moved swiftly throughout the battlefield. The troop is highly trained on slingload and pathfinder operations. Every platoon has school-trained pathfinders who can effectively locate, mark, and control helicopter landing zones. They can also be inserted in advance to mark drop zones for parachute operations.

Because of these capabilities, the troop can be pushed out as far as needed since supplies can be delivered by either slingload or door bundles. Also, since the UH-60L can pick up equipment up to around 8,200 lbs., the troop can be slung quickly around the battlefield or into another area of operation.

The troop can conduct operations in all weather, 24 hours a day, day or night, mounted or dismounted. Many times, the troop will have two platoons conducting mounted reconnaissance with one of the platoons conducting dismounted operations. This allows the division to insert the platoon deep into enemy territory and observe specific objectives or Named Areas of Interest (NAIs). A mission, which is often conducted by the dismounted platoon, is Battle Damage Assessment (BDA). After a strike on an objective from either the Kiowa Warriors or Apaches, the only way to determine the extent of casualties or damage is to place eyes on the objective. By inserting a dismounted platoon, the exact damage can be determined and radioed back to waiting operators in the rear.

The ability of the troop to conduct both mounted and dismounted operations, combined with airborne or airmobile operations, gives the troop capabilities that heavier forces cannot match. The troop can be deployed much more quickly, both tactically and strategically, whereas the armored cavalry troop must either arrive by sea or air-land. In order to air-land, however, either the airport or Field Landing Strip (FLS) must first be secured.

The trade-off is the unit's lack of armor protection, but in a wooded or mountainous terrain it can be argued that the Bradley Fighting Vehicle is very vulnerable since its maneuverability and weapons ranges are greatly reduced.

Alpha Troop's mission extends across a wide spectrum. Of course, its main missions are reconnaissance and security. The troop often conducts a zone reconnaissance with a couple of routes included in the zone, which will be used later as main supply routes for the division. The troop will then pause along a screen line while waiting for follow-on operations. The troop also conducts many other missions, which fall under Stability and Support Operations (S&SO). Some of these include convoy security, checkpoint security, or Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) missions. Convoy security and checkpoint security missions were often assigned in Somalia and are currently carried out in Bosnia.

DART missions can be assigned both in peacetime and during conflicts. This basic mission is to retrieve a pilot who has either crashed or been shot down in enemy territory. This mission is conducted both mounted and dismounted, depending on the terrain and threat. The troop has also participated in a couple of counter-drug and border patrol missions with Joint Task Force Six. During one of the missions, the troop, using its thermal capabilities, helped capture a total of 106 illegal aliens crossing the border at one time, which was the record in October 1995.

Since Alpha Troop conducts a multitude of missions, rigorous training ensures that all soldiers are proficient in these numerous areas. The troop maintains an Army Physical Fitness Test average of around 270 points and conducts quarterly 20 km road marches. Semi-annual gunneries are conducted using *FM 17-12-8, Light Cavalry Gunnery*. The troop also developed and conducts the only Excellence in Armor program at Fort Bragg for the 19D cavalry scout. The troop deploys to such places as the Joint Readiness Training Center; Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort A.P. Hill, Virginia, for gunneries and training; and Fort Knox, Kentucky to conduct SIMNET.

Most of the time, the troop will conduct airborne operations into these areas in order to help maintain proficiency and simulate jumping into unknown territory. The troop also participates in division emergency readiness deployment exercises (EDREs) in which the units on mission cycle will be alerted and conduct operations either at Fort Bragg or another area of the country, such as Fort Chaffee, Arkansas.

The troop conducts airborne operations from one to three times a month. Each platoon has qualified jumpmasters, who

can safely supervise paratroopers as they jump out of an aircraft. Fort Bragg is the only Army post where armor/cavalry officers or 19D cavalry scouts can attend jumpmaster school, a three-week course in which soldiers learn how to inspect and rig equipment, and perform their actions within the aircraft.

One of these actions includes hanging out of the aircraft for what is called a "Clear to the Rear." This is done to ensure that there are not any low flying aircraft under the jumpmasters' plane and that there are not any jumpers being towed by their static lines. When conducting jumps, soldiers will typically carry anywhere between 70 and 100 lbs. of equipment.

Alpha Troop, 1-17th Cavalry is a unique troop which can accomplish a multitude of missions. Whether jumping at 800 feet or skimming above the trees while flying nap of the earth (NOE) in a UH-60 Blackhawk, the troop can be flying anywhere in the world and ready for an airborne assault within 18 hours of notification. Once in country, the troop can swiftly move across the battlefield, either mounted or dismounted, by conducting air-mobile and slingload operations. The troop gives the Aviation Brigade and the 82d Airborne Division the enhanced capability of conducting reconnaissance and security missions 24 hours a day anywhere in the world as well as the flexibility of numerous other missions. With its stealth, maneuverability, and firepower, Alpha Troop brings an added punch to the light fighters.

CPT Gregory Stephens is a 1993 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, where he received his Armor commission and a B.S. in Electrical Engineering. He has served with A Trp, 1-17th Cav, 82d ABN Div, as a scout platoon leader and XO. His military schooling includes the Armor Officer Basic Course, Scout Platoon Leaders Course, Ranger School, Jumpmaster School, Air Assault School, and Pathfinder School. He is currently stationed at Ft. Leonard Wood, Mo., where he completed the Engineer Officer Advanced Course and completed a masters in Engineering Management. His follow-on assignment will be at Ft. Drum, N.Y. with 3-17th Cavalry, 10th Mountain Division.